

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD AND MIGRATIONS

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The third issue of *JAm It!*, “Environmental Hazards and Migrations,” explores the relations between environmental transformations and migrations in the North American context from a multidisciplinary perspective. The unprecedented magnitude of environmental changes we are witnessing is dramatically accelerating human mobility across the globe, foreseeing a grim future for human and non-human communities in the most endangered habitats. Since the United Nations Environment Programme’s official recognition of environmental refugees in 1985, the relationship between environmental changes and human mobility has spearheaded a vigorous debate among policymakers as well as scholars from several disciplines, who have begun exploring the connections among climatic disruptions, ecological transformations, and migratory phenomena. While scholarship in American Studies has produced relevant contributions analyzing the historical and present contingencies of both endogenous and exogenous migratory flows, the complex relations between migrations and ecological change require further inquiry.

Environmental historians have investigated the ecological reasons that are radically reshaping patterns of human mobility across the globe. They have renamed this process “the Great Acceleration,” an expression that mirrors the increasingly global volume of anthropogenic activities since 1945 and its unprecedented reflection on the ecological balance of the eco-biosphere. Just as importantly, other scholars have traced back these unprecedented changes to the so-called Columbian Exchange—that is, the

unprecedented circulation of animals, plants, illnesses, and goods since Columbus' expedition to the Americas in 1492. Both these historical reconstructions are currently credited as two essential landmarks of the Anthropocene theory, a geological hypothesis claiming that the anthropogenic impact on the earth's ecosystem should be considered as a *de facto* telluric force, whose changes will be observable in the geological eras to come. Whether the Anthropocene will become a consolidated reality among scientists in the future, its historical and ecological roots are indissolubly connected to the relentless mobility of humankind across time and space, a testimony of its formidable resilience as a species. While the ecological consequences of the Anthropocene will continue to permeate academic and political debates in the future, human mobility will be increasingly affected by these unprecedented changes, forcing a reconsideration of concepts such as natural habitat, citizenship, and nation. The implications of these socio-ecological processes are powerful and, to some extent, still escape our full comprehension. They have the potential to reshape global economic and geopolitical scenarios, paving the way for cultural and ecological changes to redefine the role of the human race in our planet's ecology.

Furthermore, as we draft this introduction, humanity has been once again forcefully called to reconsider its role as an ecological force. While in historical perspective the current COVID-19 pandemic might look like one of many plagues that have haunted our resilient species over millennia, its ecological roots are indissolubly related to the growing human influence on the world's food-chain and its spread has been dramatically accelerated by the relentless human mobility that characterizes our times. While the sanitary consequences of the current pandemic might impair human mobility in the near future, in the long run they might exacerbate it. As estimated by a recent report from The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), climate imbalances will continue to threaten the livelihood of human groups inhabiting endangered habitats. As these communities will face the need to continue moving across the globe in search of not only better living conditions and medical assistance, but sheer survival, they will confront increasingly restrictive policies, massive budget cuts to allocated migration funds, and enhanced mobility dysfunction. If that is the case, migratory

phenomena will need appropriate social and ecological responses beyond international travel bans imposed across hemispheres. Equally important, humankind will need new narratives of hope and resilience in order to look at the next major challenges of our times. This issue attempts to contribute to these debates proposing submissions that—in line with the *JAm It!*'s commitment to diversity and multi-disciplinarity—discuss environmental migrations from/to/within the United States, both in past and present times and from different disciplinary and methodological angles.

The journal's thematic section opens with Colin Fisher's introductory essay, "The Crossroads of U.S. Environmental History and Migration History." In a commendable review effort, Fisher enumerates some notable reasons at the core of current environmental migrations, progressively moving to an historical analysis of the phenomenon in different contexts of the world, with a particular emphasis on the United States. Through a systematic literature review, the author illustrates the main scholarship that has analyzed the relationship between human mobility and the environment. These include pathfinder authors (such as Oscar Handlin and John Bodnar), environmental historians (Alfred Crosby, Louis Warren, Marco Armiero, Richard Tucker, Matthew Klinge, and Catherine McNeur), as well as political scientists (John Hultgren), and environmental sociologists (David Naguib Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park). While differing in their disciplinary scope and territorial emphasis, this growing literature corpus has a common underlying thread: they tell us stories of marginalized and racialized populations struggling for environmental justice in disadvantaged urban and rural ecological metabolisms. While, as the author proposes, the relationship between immigrants and nature does not in every case present a "linear path," in most cases not only migrant groups altered their ecosystems, but also found creative ways to build communities and forge identities.

Gilberto Mazzoli and Daniele Valisena's contribution moves along similar lines, retracing the history of Italian migrants in Chicago as narrated by a local newspaper, *The Chicago Tribune*. In particular, the authors focus on the rather unusual occupation of urban spaces by ethnic working-class social formations between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the article demonstrates, Italian migrants devised

unusual adaptation strategies to the unknown urban spaces that they occupied, creating a hybrid environment where the borders between urban and rural continuously blurred. Naturally, their precarious livelihoods clashed with the ideas of a city that was increasingly undergoing sanitation and modernization processes. In this sense, as Italian migrant communities devised resilience strategies in which their cultural knowledge intermingled with a foreign environment, their practices were often deemed as non-modern, especially in comparison to their surrounding modernizing urban environment. This contrast manifested explicitly through the opposition between subsistence gardens in Italian suburban homes in the United States and the traditional home lawn epitomizing the middle-class American dream.

Adopting a critical approach at the crossroads between philosophy and the history of ideas, Claiton Marcio da Silva and Leandro Gomes Moreira Cruz propose a critical reading of Thoreau's *Walden* in "Biopolitics and the Anthropocene Era: Ideas of Nature in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*." Putting one of Thoreau's main philosophical works into current ecological debates on the Anthropocene, the authors provide an ecocritical reading informed by philosophical notions such as neomaterialism and posthumanism, contributing to the emerging disciplinary field of the environmental humanities. Through an original interpretative lens, the authors investigate Thoreau's critical assessment of the dichotomous relations between humans and nature, analyzing his response to modernization and the confrontation between different human groups in the region (European settlers and natives). In their opinion, Thoreau's social criticism could potentially be adopted as a litmus test in order to rethink the relations between humans and nonhumans and their role in ecological systems in the Anthropocene era.

From a different disciplinary standpoint, in "Understanding the Fabric of the Natural World," Leonardo Nolé takes an ecocritical and post-human approach to analyze how Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*, by substituting a single protagonist with a collective natural entity, challenges humanity's self-centered narrative while tackling anthropogenic issues. Connecting the history of migrations to the United States to the capitalistic timber business and the progressive disappearance of the virgin forest, Nolé discusses how Proulx's novel frames the many interconnected stories that *made* North

America within a narrative of destruction, claiming that only a holistic perspective can “reweave the numerous threads that compose ‘the fabric of the natural world.’”

A similar ecocritical approach is taken by Elena Corioni in “Apocalyptic Visions from the Past: The Colonization of Mars in Dick’s *Martian Time-Slip*.” In her contribution, Corioni investigates the concerns related to global climate change that emerge in Philip K. Dick’s novel as epitomized by a migration to Mars. The essay examines how *Martian Time-Slip* deals with concerns linked to the future of the natural environment and the human race. In the first section, the author explores dynamics of migration and terraforming, showing how Dick rewrites American history by displacing it to an extraterrestrial world. Linking Western expansion to the new frontier of Mars, the novel illustrates the destructive forces of colonization represented by the encounter of human and alien life. Finally, Corioni establishes a correlation between the human and the nonhuman, using mental illness as a narrative device.

With Nina Venkataraman’s article “The Absent Victims: An Ecolinguistic Study of Environmental Refugees in the New York Times,” the thematic section moves from literary dystopia to ecolinguistics. The author investigates the discursive construction of environmental refugees in *The New York Times*. Through the use of frame analysis, the author investigates a corpus of 78 newspaper articles collected from *The New York Times* from 1985 to 2015 including terms such as “climate refugee/migrant” or “environmental refugee/migrant.” The author argues that environmental refugees featured in the *The New York Times* are framed as a security risk. She also argues that this is an incomplete representation of the issue, as some other ideas, like the lack of legal status, do not seem to be given equal legitimacy in constructing the issue. In the long timespan considered, the author observes a shift from the discussion of human displacement as one of the effects of climate change to its portrayal as impacting climate change. Narrowing the problem of environmental refugees to a security issue means focusing on tackling risks and threats rather than seeking the causes that lead these people to migrate. In so doing, the newspaper underspecifies humanitarian aspects, the agency of the victims, and the institutional practices that discuss responsibility.

Finally, Massimiliano Demata closes the thematic section of this issue of *JAm It!* Along similar disciplinary lines, with a reflection on the use of language in relation to issues related to environmental migrations. Demata insists on the importance of the use of language when it comes to such issues—issues he defines as social—to avoid perpetuating and reinforcing behaviors that victimize subjects displaced by environmental issues. Demata highlights the need for social changes and for a critical approach to the use of language in the narratives related to migrations, especially as environmental changes become increasingly dramatic.

After examining environmental migrations from multiple disciplinary perspectives, our free section begins with Valentina Romanzi's critical reading of the movie *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2018). The essay shows how three different levels of reality are represented in the movie, claiming that they are portrayed as three isolated worlds that collide by the end of the movie. The three levels of reality we encounter in the movie are: a dystopic Columbus, Ohio, in 2045; OASIS, a virtual reality video game which configures as a parallel utopian world that allows people to escape from the misery of reality; and a world defined by metatextual references to geek culture and retrogaming, evocative of Zygmunt Bauman's theories on nostalgia described in his book *Retrotopia* (2017). It is the convergence of these three seemingly discrete fictional worlds that grants the plot a didactic happy ending that reflects on the risks of prioritizing vicarious experience over lived experience.

Finally, in "Crossing the Threshold of Temporality: 'Story of Your Life' and *Arrival*" Chiara Patrizi focuses on the ways in which Ted Chiang's 1998 novella "Story of Your Life" and its 2016 film adaptation by Denis Villeneuve, *Arrival*, address the modes of the eerie, a concept theorized by Mark Fisher as "a failure of absence or a failure of presence." These modes offer a key to analyzing and understanding the strategies that Chiang and Villeneuve employ to narrate a story—two complementary stories indeed—which affects communal as well as individual existence. The encounter with an alien population (the Heptapods) poses challenges which open the way for other, more existential questions. In particular, Patrizi focuses on issues that are not valid only in the narrative environment of science fiction, but that deal with fears and doubts which

are also very tangible outside the fictional world whenever the mind is shaken by an image or an event that breaks through our pre-established certainties regarding the life we inhabit.

A much-needed note of gratitude to conclude this introduction—this issue was completed at a time where our lives were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We owe our gratitude to all the people who have contributed to this volume with unmitigated perseverance and dedication, and especially to our contributors, who managed to do such remarkable work despite the extraordinary conditions of precariousness that have affected all our personal and professional lives over the past few months. Our thanks also go to the University of Torino for its invaluable logistic and technical support, and to AISNA (Italian Association for North American Studies) and its Graduate Forum for their intellectual and financial patronage.

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